

## GROUP ONE: REPORT TO THE NEWTON CENTRE TASK FORCE

***Newton Centre (n.): a small commercial center completely surrounded by neighborhoods.***

*[Y]ou don't meet other people while driving in a private car, nor often in a bus or trolley. It's on foot that you see people's faces and statures and that you meet and experience them. That is how public socializing and community enjoyment in daily life can most easily occur. And it's on foot that one can be most intimately involved with the urban environment; with stores, houses, the natural environment, and with people.*

- Allan B. Jacobs "Great Streets"

## PREFACE

More than two years ago when the Newton Centre Task Force (NCTF) made its findings public, the abutting community was arbitrarily presented with the proposition that the Newton Centre commercial district is ugly, outdated, and so dysfunctional that only development on an unprecedented scale can save it.

For the members of Group 1, many of whom work in established businesses in the Centre or live in homes on the neighborhood streets surrounding it, this characterization is divorced from reality. It does not describe the Village where we raise our families, where we live and work and shop.

Group 1 formed in response to the NCTF's first visioning session and public meeting a year and a half ago. Although only a few of us belonged to the group of people initially appointed to the Task Force by Mayor Cohen, we regularly attended Task Force meetings and were alarmed by what we heard.

Group 1 is made up almost entirely of local merchants and Newton Centre residents who live within one-quarter-mile radius of the Village. Largely made up of volunteers, those of us who came onboard the Task Force during its second phase, have drafted this plan as an alternative to proposals that call for heavy development within the Centre. This plan was entirely conceived, researched, and formulated by residents and local merchants with varying kinds of expertise to offer, limited time at our disposal, and with strong feelings of pride and affection for the neighborhood we call home.

## INTRODUCTION

Newton Centre Village is a commercially diverse and vibrant village center with a well-established network of public open spaces, a fully developed commercial infrastructure and footprint, and a strong village history.

The term “Smart Growth” has been heard frequently at Task Force meetings as a rationale for large-scale change. But Newton Centre Village residents are already living “Smart Growth.” We live in single-family or appropriately-scaled-multi-family homes within easy walking distance of the “T” and of the Village’s businesses and restaurants, its parks and schools and its houses of worship (*Appendix B: Unsprawl Case Study: Newton Centre, Massachusetts*).

If the community as a whole is to thrive with a maximum of mutual respect and cooperation, and a minimum of friction, it is necessary to maintain a delicate balance between residential, commercial, and public properties. We reject any plan that would destroy the Village in order to save it, whether in the name of increased revenue or under the deceptive banner of “Smart Growth.” The components of our proposed plan aim to preserve the unique scale and character of Newton Centre, including both its residential and commercial areas, making the village center even more attractive and lively than we find it today.

We agree that the Consensus Plan<sup>1</sup> (*Appendix A: Draft Consensus Report of the Newton Centre Task Force*), which is predicated on the premise that all of the parking spaces in the central lot can be shifted and kept within the triangle area, would be the best-case scenario. In the event that this is not feasible, we have created an alternative plan that would fulfill most of the important goals of the Consensus Plan (increased open space, pedestrian pathways, screening of parked cars, benches, tables, areas to socialize, and a more attractive triangle area) while also protecting the triangle parking lot that is vital to the well-being of our retail establishments, or putting any undue pressure, or additional financial burdens on the city.

The centerpiece of this vision calls for relocating 64 parking spaces from the Triangle Parking Lot to diagonal configurations along retail frontages on Langley Road, Lyman and Center Green Street. This allows over half the capacity of the parking lot to be replaced by an attractive village green that will provide for both active and passive public uses.

The Centre is to be improved by implementing a comprehensive pedestrian safety plan along with automobile traffic improvements placed in the context of a beautification program focused on landscaping, under-grounding of

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<sup>1</sup> **Update: Early in 2007 the Consensus Plan (CP) was presented to the public at a meeting at the Mason-Rice School. This meeting represented the culmination of hours of negotiation between the three groups making up the Newton Centre Task Force. At the time of the presentation all members of the task force had agreed to the general principles embodied in the CP. Subsequently the Group One report was completed based upon the CP. Group 1 was notified in June of 2008 that Group 2-3 had withdrawn from the CP. We have therefore appended the CP to this report.**

utilities, beautifying streets and sidewalks, better signage and lighting, and improved maintenance of all of the above.

The pedestrian experience will be enhanced by improvements such as walkways and bikeways, raised crosswalks, and “neck downs” at intersections, as well as measures to smooth and calm vehicular traffic. The result will be a safer and more convenient village center.

Newton Centre Village is among the handsomer village centers in the Garden city, blessed with commercial structures, churches, and private homes of great aesthetic value and historic significance. The Newton Centre “T” station and the First Baptist Church are landmarks designed by H. H. Richardson, architect of Boston’s Trinity Church, and the Newton Centre Playground was designed in part by Frederick Law Olmsted (and completed by his firm), originator of Boston’s “Emerald Necklace” of parks and greenways. Many houses on adjacent streets have been included in the Newton Historical Society’s annual walking tours of significant homes and have been marked by historic plaques. Our plan calls for honoring and highlighting this rich local heritage by establishing clear historic preservation and conservation design guidelines to preserve the unique and eclectic nature of the village.

These measures will result in a sparkling village center that will be a model for the other villages of Newton.

## PART I



Figure 1 sketch by Mongkol Tansantisuk

### TRIANGLE PARK

*From the very first meeting of the Task Force and throughout its existence, attention has focused on the Triangle Parking Lot. Many members have viewed it as an ugly and inappropriate centerpiece for an otherwise attractive village. Many also consider it a waste of valuable public space. Group 1 agrees that Newton Centre could present a more welcoming face to visitors and a more coherent and appealing space for the use of residents, businesses, and their clients and customers. But we are also aware that visible, convenient parking is the lifeblood of this or any commercial area; without it, business can wither and die. And we are also mindful of our responsibility to the neighborhoods that surround the commercial Village so closely on all sides. These would become far less safe and pleasant places to live if parking and traffic were to be relocated from the commercial Centre, where it belongs, to residential streets, where it emphatically does not belong. Our plan for the Triangle takes all these interests into account.*

The main Triangle (as well as the smaller adjacent Beacon Triangle) is to be reinvented as an attractive and socially active space, providing a visual identity for the Village Centre (Figure 1). The centerpiece of our plan calls

for the construction of a larger, more open and attractive multi-use village green. To make this possible, only as many parking spaces (64 by our count) are to be relocated from the Triangle lot as can be accommodated by a diagonal reconfiguration of parking spaces along adjacent commercial streets. Plans for the improved Triangle Park will be based on a formal design competition after a budget has been set and agreed to by the city.

Our plan allows for just over half the existing parking spaces (or fewer if feasible) to remain within the Triangle. We envision that the remaining land--the existing green space and the bulk of the parking lot--will be converted into a large, attractive Village Green that will provide space for a variety of public uses. Our plan calls for natural screening of the remaining parking spaces as well as landscaping and beautification improvements--gardens, benches, attractive light fixtures--along the retail frontages of Beacon Street, Centre Street, and Langley Road, and extending into nearby side streets (CP).

We envision actively expanding the mix of public uses that will make the Village and the revitalized Green an attractive meeting place both for existing village-scale events and similar activities not currently provided for. There will be open space with gardens and trees, outdoor benches and tables. Possible uses include performances on the Green, outdoor movie nights, concerts, public art fairs, as well as recreational family uses of neighborhood scale. We envision a traditional New England band shell and a few small kiosks or carts for newspapers, flowers, and other small-scale amenities.

On-grade enhancements would include:

- Landscaping and structured plantings
- Maintained/increased green space
- A strong north-south pedestrian linkage across the Triangle between Beacon Street and Langley Road

## **PARKING**

Given the limited amount of space available in the Village center, we feel strongly that public parking should be for customers of the local stores and businesses, area residents, and those wishing to enjoy the Centre Green. Commuter parking is a separate need that must be addressed by authorities on a regional basis. The Village center cannot and should not be expected to meet that additional demand.

To accommodate local parking in a way that complements local needs, we recommend that a wide range of experimental measures be tested in the village to see which improvements are most effective. There should be clearly established goals and measurement guidelines to systematically test results and determine what works.

Under our plan, 64 of the existing 150 street-level parking spaces inside the Triangle would be replaced one for one with diagonal street parking. This would enhance general accessibility by increasing parking spaces close to various destinations in the Centre that are now underserved (CP).

One-for-one replacement parking calls for:

- Diagonal parking on Lyman Street (53 spaces)
- Diagonal parking on Center Green Street (11 spaces)

No parking structures would be needed or planned at this time to replace the 64 spaces currently in the Triangle (Figure 2). In fact the Newton Centre Task Force findings showed that Newton Centre does not have a parking space problem, but rather a parking management problem (CP). A parking management plan would provide for improved enforcement and would offer and monitor special employee permits for use in shared parking and other areas outside the Triangle. In addition we advocate that a study of “free-market” parking meters be done, and if appropriate implemented with 100% of the parking revenue returned to the village to improve services.

**Gain additional employee parking by:**

- Setting up a new permit system which establishes designated employee parking in the Pleasant Street, Pelham Street, and Cypress Street lots.
- Negotiating shared workday parking in various church and private lots as part of a managed parking plan.

**Protect abutting/surrounding residential streets from overflow from business/commuter parking overflow:**

- Allow permit parking for residential streets contiguous to the Centre if residents so desire.
- Eliminate 12-hour meters in Newton Centre.
- Ensure strict enforcement of all regulations.

**Improved signage:**

- Attractive and uniformly designed signs should be installed that show where the parking lots in the Centre are located (CP).
- A “parking resource” pamphlet should be made available for businesses to provide to their employees and customers and should be e-mailed to the community annually

**All parking areas:**

- Creative landscaping and screening of all parking areas (CP)
- Creative landscaping on all new construction (CP)
- More frequent trash pickup, street cleaning, and snow/ice removal in public parking lots and Village streets

**Encourage alternative means of transportation:**

- Bicycle racks (CP)



- Bicycle lanes (CP)
- Walking map of the Centre and surrounding areas (aqueduct walk to Waban/Chestnut Hill)
- Develop a comprehensive plan to encourage and protect pedestrian traffic



Figure 2 sketch by Mongkol Tansantisuk

## TRAFFIC

*If you want cars to drive like they are in a village, then build a village.*  
 -- Hans Monderman

*For many years Newton had a policy of managing the streets for the benefit of cars and trucks. This worked to the detriment of pedestrian safety and enjoyment.*

It is crucial that modifications be recommended for improving and calming traffic flow in the Newton Centre area without increasing through traffic and without adding to the traffic on neighborhood streets.

- Protect abutting/surrounding residential streets from overflow business/commuter parking (CP)
- Address traffic problem in Centre: rush hour traffic jams, residential street "cut through," etc.
- Better traffic management through a system of traffic calming measures. These measures would include signal changes and mid-block crossings, and pedestrian activated traffic signals

**Traffic calming improvements** to be further investigated include

- Improved signage (CP)
- Raised crosswalks (CP)

- Investigate posting of “residents only” access on certain streets during AM and PM rush hours
- Explore other traffic-calming devices

The City of Newton should commission a comprehensive traffic study that looks at the entire road system from Route 9 to Four Corners, the Needham Street/Centre Street axis, and Route 128 to Newton Corner including the Mass Pike. Without a comprehensive study, the traffic problem cannot be properly addressed.

## **PEDESTRIAN EXPERIENCE**

*With its low-rise commercial structures, its popular restaurants and coffee shops, and its attractive boutiques, Newton Centre has long been a pleasant and convenient “walking village.” But increased traffic flow and lack of attention to street-level design and maintenance have eroded the pleasure, and sometimes the safety, of walking through the village.*

Group 1 wants to see expanded and enhanced pedestrian walkways and crosswalks, supplemented with clear village “portals.” The proposal for a traffic roundabout at Beacon and Centre Streets to enhance safety and slow and smooth the flow of vehicular traffic deserves consideration.

Other measures to enhance the pedestrian experience include

- Better, more attractive street lighting
- Improved signage: impose more consistent parking regulations in the Centre and mark them clearly; remove multiple and confusing parking signs; provide “You Are Here” map kiosks; publish and enforce design guidelines for commercial signage (CP)
- Create a thoughtful plan to encourage foot traffic within the village (CP)
- Increase the number of crosswalks, and provide better placement to conform to actual pedestrian routes, such as mid-block crossings. Provide visual cues for drivers approaching intersections, such as bollards, raised crosswalks, and changes in paving materials amongst others (CP)
- Narrow and/or redesign the major thoroughfares of Centre and Beacon streets to include raised landscaped medians, “bump outs”/“neck downs” to make crosswalks safer (CP)
- Signal changes
- Improved design and maintenance of all public sidewalks and walkways (CP)

## **Landscape and Beautification**

Maintain/increase green space. Give proper attention to landscaping using city, volunteer, and private business resources. Our plan calls for (CP):



- More and better-maintained trees and landscaping of green space
- Pruning and preventive care of trees and shrubs
- Regular mowing and weeding of green space
- Flowers planted/hung throughout the village
- Sidewalks maintained, repaired, and cleaned frequently
- Better and more timely snow/ice removal on all sidewalks
- Removal of all chain link fencing, which is an eyesore, to be replaced by hedges or wrought iron
- Minimization and centralization of news boxes and better maintenance of area(s) in which they are permitted
- “Welcome to Newton Centre” signs on each approach into the village

## **ZONING & DESIGN GUIDELINES**

Owners of commercial property should be encouraged to reflect in their own buildings the improvements we envision in public spaces. The overall look and feel of the Village can be made more cohesive and attractive with the addition to private commercial property of (CP):

- Attractive lighting lamps throughout the Village
- The use of high-quality materials and complementary design
- Plantings and beautification of sidewalks
- Consistent signage: stores, walkways, parking areas, MBTA station

New building construction and renovation of existing buildings should be permitted

- Only if appropriate in character, use, and scale to the existing village
- Only after careful review to ensure such changes conform to existing zoning ordinances
- Only after consideration of any adverse impacts such as increased traffic and parking problems or demands on residential neighborhoods, public schools and other city facilities

These modest changes can be achieved with

- No zoning overlays
- No zoning and special permit changes

One major change that *is* called for is a change in attitude on the part of the city, which has allowed commercial development to proceed unevenly and arbitrarily, with little design oversight and notoriously lax follow-up or enforcement of its own ordinances, licensing and permitting requirements. Furthermore, a communication system with abutters and neighbors in a wide radius should be established.

## **LAND USE – ZONING**

*Members of the Task Force, as well as members of the public who have attended sessions and open meetings, have regretted the lack in Newton Centre of convenient village-focused businesses such as a grocery store, a book store, and hardware/home furnishing stores, as well as community meeting space. The disappearance of once popular businesses such as these is an ironic result of the success of Newton Centre, since commercial rents have risen so high that owners of small businesses can no longer afford to compete with banks and chain stores for adequate floor space.*

With a concerted outreach effort the city could work to improve the mix of private uses in Newton Centre Village and provide better guidance to future development in keeping with the current character of the Village. We recommend:

- Sharpening the current special permit process with clearer guidelines on maintaining existing scale, character, density
- Reclaim public buildings for community uses such as the former branch library (a National Trust Historic Property)
- Careful consideration of barring large chain stores by ordinance

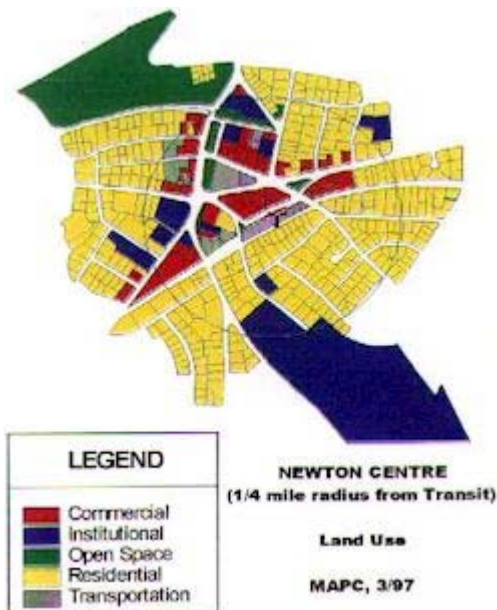
## HOUSING

*By suburban standards, even by the standards of many Newton neighborhoods, Newton Centre is densely settled. There are over 2,700 households with a population of nearly 8,000 people. Within a quarter-mile<sup>2</sup> radius around the Newton Centre "T" station, there are nearly 600 dwelling units at a density of 7.4 units per acre.<sup>3</sup> (By now these numbers have increased.)*

We feel that it is essential to maintain the current Village character and scale that draw residents to the neighborhood. A modest amount of additional housing can nevertheless be achieved over time by

- Encouraging the re-conversion of nonresidential space above the ground floor of commercial buildings back to residential use (where it once existed)
- Encouraging residential use above the ground floor (under the existing height limits)
- Re-zone residential properties now used as

businesses to encourage reversion to residential use—possibly adding to the stock of affordable housing



<sup>2</sup> Metropolitan Area Planning Council June 1997 report, *Newton Centre Transit-Oriented Development Case Study*, written by Kent Stasiowski and Justin Hollander.

<sup>3</sup> Metropolitan Area Planning Council June 1997 report, *Newton Centre Transit-Oriented Development Case Study*, written by Kent Stasiowski and Justin Hollander.

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION

*Newton has a unique system in which 13 villages, each of distinct character, together make up the social fabric of the city and allow it to feel more like a small town than it actually is. Within this system Newton has no single "downtown." Instead, each neighborhood has its own center. Developing Newton Centre into a citywide or regional "downtown," as some members of the Task Force have proposed, would drastically change the village character that draws people to Newton Centre in the first place. Such changes would not be desirable.*

Signs of Newton Centre's long and varied history still exist throughout the village and contribute to its unique character (CP). These include:

- Historically significant and architecturally interesting older buildings
- Newer, predominantly single-story commercial buildings
- Human, pedestrian-friendly scale and appearance

All of this contributes greatly to the identity and visual appeal of the village. Historically and aesthetically significant buildings need to be protected from destruction or inappropriate modification. The adjacent residential streets, many of them lined with homes dating from the Victorian era, need to be protected from commercial encroachment. Public education and awareness are essential. We can do this by:

- Connecting the historic greens and open spaces which already exist.  
These include:
  - ❖ The Newton Centre Common and Triangle
  - ❖ The historic green space in front of Piccadilly Square
  - ❖ The historic World War I Memorial Flagpole Green
  - ❖ Powderhouse Hill
  - ❖ The Aqueduct area
  - ❖ Newton Centre Playground
  - ❖ Samuel Francis Smith Memorial Park
  - ❖ Beacon Triangle
  - ❖ Union Street MBTA land
- Preserving the existing skyline and burying utilities in these areas.
- Establishing clear guidelines that will (CP):
  - ❖ Require preservation of historic buildings
  - ❖ Promote appropriate conservation, renovation, modification, rehabilitation of existing buildings
  - ❖ Make sure historic buildings are adequately protected from destruction or inappropriate modification (example: carriage house next to T stop now a taxi office).
  - ❖ Promote new construction compatible in materials, character, use, and scale to the existing village

Ways to create public awareness and promote appreciation of the historic buildings, homes, and public spaces include:

- Providing plaques on historic buildings and freestanding interpretive signs for open spaces
- Developing walking/biking tours throughout the village and for wider interconnected areas on trails throughout Newton
- Making pamphlets available at the Newton "T" Station

**Newton Centre Historic Landmarks include:**

- ❖ Newton Centre Railroad Station
- ❖ Sumner Street Historic District
- ❖ Trinity Church
- ❖ First Congregational Church
- ❖ Newton Centre Playground
- ❖ First Baptist Church
- ❖ Church at 10 Langley Road
- ❖ Newton Centre Branch Library
- ❖ Bradford Court Apartments
- ❖ Bray's Block
- ❖ Historic Greens (see above)

**FINANCIAL**

*Group 1 opposes selling or leasing Newton's public spaces for private development. The improvements we have recommended are modest and can be achieved with limited public expenditure. The benefits will flow to local taxpayers--to the businesses that give Newton Centre its commercial vitality and to the residents who live in the city, patronize its businesses, and enjoy its open spaces.*

**Priority Financing Action Initiatives:**

Secure and leverage multiple sources of financing for village improvements and beautification:

- Secure business or organizational sponsorship for selected village improvements;
- Secure grants or outside financial support that can leverage any available resources from the city, state, and federal governments
- Secure commitment from the city for 10-20% of Public Works and Parks and Recreation's capital improvements budget to fund a matching program for village-specific projects. This funding would be available to all villages.
- Further explore the use of a Business Improvement District or analogous funding or fee mechanism to finance ongoing management of the initiatives
- CPA funds for the new open space
- Meter revenue

A modest total capital investment of \$3-5 million could be raised through multiple financial sources:

- A modest incremental operating budget of \$200,000 per year could be raised through increasing parking fees. Currently Newton Centre accounts for more than half of the city's income from parking meters. Some of this should be earmarked for the maintenance of the village
- About 20% from donations from residents and merchants (\$50 per year for seven years)
- About 20% from the merchant/commercial community through possible fees, donations, employee parking program
- 20% through private/business donations, paid sponsorships, and advertising (equivalent to about \$150k per year for seven years)
- 40% through matching city (as noted above) and state grants (\$300,000 per year for seven years)

## Conclusion

Our goal is to protect and improve an already thriving Newton Centre Village and to provide a model for other villages.

We should be striving for improvements that focus on a comprehensive pedestrian safety plan, traffic improvements, a beautification program focused on landscaping, under-grounding of utilities, beautifying streets and sidewalks, better signage and lighting, and improved maintenance of all of the above. Enforcement of existing ordinances and regulations is required immediately. These improvements will support the Village's signature businesses and enhance the quality of life for neighborhood residents, patrons, and merchants.

Our plan requires no significant legal or policy changes to move forward. Most of our ideas are supported in the *Newton Comprehensive Plan*<sup>4</sup> approved by the Board of Aldermen in November 2007 and the *Newton Recreation and Open Space Plan*<sup>5</sup>. Our approach is practical and replicable in

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<sup>4</sup> Goal 1: To recognize, preserve and maintain the City's most important natural assets and resources. (Draft Comprehensive Plan, Open Space and Recreation, October 10, 2006, page 9-12)

[Goal] 5: Promoting the Broader Use of History in Planning & Development  
Planning with and for history requires making history a useful and useable tool for all City departments, as well as all nonprofit and for-profit organizations, involved in planning and development. (Draft Comprehensive Plan, Cultural Resources, October 10, 2006, page 9-16)

<sup>5</sup> Recreation and Open Space Plan

Goal 1: To recognize, preserve, and maintain the City's important natural assets and resources. (Open Space and Recreation Plan, 2003-2007, February 2003, page 65)

other villages. We require no special consideration or exemptions from the MWRA, MBTA, or the State. Our proposals are financially feasible right away and are politically viable and are supported by residents and merchants of the Village. Our suggestions can be implemented immediately and enjoyed today.

We hope the planning process of the future works closely with residents and local businesses. To that end this document should serve as a new beginning, a place to begin a discussion, inclusive of the people who live, work, and shop in our village.

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